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FIVE WEEKS' INTENSIVE STUDY OF THE DRAMA WITH HIGH-SCHOOL SENIORS

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So much is being done nowadays to vary the traditional literature course of the high-school Senior and to fit him to appreciate, to a certain extent, his opportunities and responsibilities as a future citizen, that an experiment carried out along this line in the Wisconsin High School¹ may prove interesting. There is much here which is mere teaching framework, for I have endeavored to suggest the approach and procedure as well as the completion of each step. Much of it, naturally, grew out of class comment—in fact, the whole course was the outcome of an informal discussion raised by one pupil's pertinent question: "We all of us see some plays and lots of movies, but most of us don't know how to tell whether they're really good. Can't we learn that this year?" It was just that for which I worked, the cultivation of an ability to discriminate between the good and the poor, the beautiful and the commonplace. It will be noticed that there is ample opportunity for all kinds of work in this plan, particularly for individual research, the effective use of a library, and the necessity of giving to others in concrete, definite form the facts and conclusions which the pupil has worked out for himself. Through much of the work he is brought face to face with vital, present-day problems. There can be little passive absorption of material; each individual must create or strengthen his critical ability. There is a core of common information for all and unlimited avenues toward indefinite goals for the intellectually curious pupils. There is vigorous challenge to each boy and girl in the discussion, the publicity of individual achievement, the sharing of interest. Above all, there is no limit set to assigned work; paths are pointed out, and each young

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pioneer blazes his own trail, turning to the teacher for help only when he is confused or in trouble.

We began our drama study in the Wisconsin High School while we were completing a composition "drive." For the first few days the drama assignment for home work was indeterminate: "Find out all you can about beginnings of plays." While the boys and girls dug away at histories, encyclopedias, and literary sources, using the school library, their varying home equipments, and the public libraries, I worked out a reading list—limited, of course, to what was obtainable—and begged or borrowed as many copies as possible of good modern plays. Recent numbers of the *English Journal* and the *Drama League Monthly* offered invaluable suggestions. During the class hour most of the time was spent on composition, the pupils working out themes along certain patterns, using as subject-matter picture explanation and description or the drama-reading they were doing. I spent the time moving about from pupil to pupil, checking errors, suggesting improvements in plan or structure, outlining more work for those who were quickest or sending them to help fellow-pupils who were having trouble. During the hour each day I endeavored to have a brief talk with every pupil on his reading, keeping track of the general trend of subject-matter, suggesting further sources and material or new topics of research. Naturally there was much duplication both in subject-matter and sources. As each arrived at what seemed the end of his resources, I suggested that he organize his material into a talk, and that he make charts, diagrams, cardboard or sandbox models, blackboard sketches to illustrate his topic. By the end of the week, we had a bulletin board covered with interesting pictures, some of them drawn by pupils, some magazine pictures, some borrowed from library collections; we had a beautiful model of a Greek theater and one of a movable stage with side curtains, trapdoor, and even a hell mouth, flaming with strips of red and yellow paper. We spent two class periods giving reports, explaining models and diagrams, answering questions. Some pupils had gone back to the days of Greece and Rome, some had begun with the plays of the Middle Ages, but all of them knew something. As the work progressed, each took notes for

his individual card catalogue, as we had done all year. These boxes, by the way, were occasionally the object of an informal conference with me or one of the more mature pupils until I was sure that each boy and girl had learned how to take fairly clear, usable notes. As a teaching device, they prevent inattention by focusing interest in the subject under discussion through their demand for prompt and individual action; because of their flexibility and novelty they seem to be preferable to notebooks.

With our interest still keen in the medieval stage, we took up *Everyman*, which we read entirely in class. I made the most of my opportunity to make definite and sure the background we had gained and to set a standard for future play-reading, calling attention to some dramatic mechanism as well as the more familiar plot, characterization, style. Another time I should suggest more collateral work with all such play-reading—sketches of costumes, scenery, additional stage directions, careful cutting of a scene for oral presentation; and I believe a permanent puppet theater, such as any clever boy could construct from a packing box, would be both interesting and instructive. It happened that several pupils had seen *Everywoman* and *Experience*, recent parodies of *Everyman*, and their reports and comparisons were of decided value in modernizing what might have seemed impossibly old. Another interesting correlation which could grow out of this would be a similar dramatization of some school situation; this could be used to advantage in the school magazine or newspaper or, if there were time, worked as a class problem for presentation before the entire school.

Soon we had collected quite a representative library of worthwhile dramas. I explained the list of plays, which I had posted, gave a few definite questions or statements of what to watch for particularly in each drama, and told the pupils to read, keeping track—by notes of some sort—of the play plots and strong points, and carefully jotting down all questions which occurred to them as they worked. Constantly we were to be on the alert for links with modern plays and play situations.

While this was going on outside class, we took stock of the Shakspere plays we had studied or read carefully. *Macbeth*,

Hamlet, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice* we all knew; we were divided fairly evenly on *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It*. Then I named a definite date by which each of us should have reviewed them all—five plays at least for everyone, and two more for those who wanted extra work—and called for a volunteer leader of the discussion for each one. Because *King Lear* had been presented recently, and some of us had an enthusiastic interest in it, we chose that and *The Tempest*, which was in our class-book, for study together. Both these plays we read in the usual fashion—informally dramatizing wherever possible, working out character sketches, raising and discussing, in one group or several small ones, various questions and big ideas suggested by speeches and plot problems. We were far more interested in dramatic mechanism, however, than we had ever been, and many of us learned, to our amazement, how exceedingly similar are the methods of dramatists of all times.

Before we were ready for the review of the Shakspere plays, I had had an interview with each of the volunteer leaders, to make sure that he knew the play and was really prepared to lead class discussion. The plan worked out well; class comments raised fine points frequently, and I saw to it that no time was wasted on unnecessary or obvious material. Each of us kept on his desk a small library, for many and many a time we frantically dug out words or passages in defense or refutation of some statement. As a round-up, each pupil selected some subject in which he had become interested through his reading or class discussion and developed, out of class, what was for many a veritable thesis. A few compared plots; some gave historical backgrounds of plays; many worked out character sketches. There was no standard set; each pupil chose a topic interesting to himself and worked it out as he wished.

By this time, everyone had read fairly well into the list of modern plays. Each pupil was told to select a playwright in whom he was really interested, and to make a special study of his work, reading as many of his plays as possible. The only stipulation was that the report must be based on the pupil's own knowledge of his chosen writer and that secondary material be used sparingly. In a few cases there was duplication of choice, and I advised the

pooling of material and the organizing of it into separate topics. In all of this work—the reading of plays on the list, the preparation for the special topic—each pupil kept cards. By calling these in from time to time, I managed to check fairly accurately the work covered, and to catch up those pupils who were losing interest because of laziness or misinterpretation of material.

Finally the topics and discussions of plays began to take shape. There was so much to say, to question, to explain, that we usually spent our whole period on two or three men; yet the work never seemed to drag. Again I used the reaction device of note-taking, varying it by having those who gave topics collect the cards of the class and check them—catching their fellows' errors and, in my eyes more important, measuring their own accomplishments as speakers and teachers by definite results. The plays starred in the list which follows were read in class—as the Shakspere plays had been read, dramatically and critically—and helped to break the monotony of too many topics.

Although we all realize how statistics can distort facts and how unimportant they are, I think we all like to check ourselves by them occasionally. Of forty-seven pupils, no one read fewer than eighteen plays; more than half read thirty-five; three (two boys and a girl) read forty-three; one boy read fifty-one. To make sure that the fun and novelty of the work had not destroyed my own sense of values, I gave an impromptu quiz bristling with fact and memory questions as well as interpretive ones. Of the forty-seven closely graded papers, seven-tenths were good and excellent.

**Everyman*.

Shakspere: **King Lear*; **The Tempest*; *Hamlet*; *Macbeth*; *Julius Caesar*; *Merchant of Venice*; *Twelfth Night*; *Midsummer Night's Dream*; *As You Like It*.

Goldsmith: **She Stoops to Conquer*; *The Good-Natured Man*.

Sheridan: *The Rivals*; *The School for Scandal*.

Ibsen: **An Enemy of Society*.

Maeterlinck: *The Blue-bird*; *The Intruder*.

Shaw: **Androcles and the Lion*; *Arms and the Man*; *You Never Can Tell*.

Galsworthy: **The Mob*; *Strife*; *Justice*.

Barrie: *Half Hours*; *Quality Street*.

Zangwill: *The Melting Pot*.

Yeats: **The Land of Heart's Desire; Cathleen Ni Hoolihan; The Pot of Broth.*

Gregory: *Seven Short Plays.*

Fitch: *The Social Climbers; The Truth.*

Mackaye: *Canterbury Pilgrims; Jeanne d'Arc; The Immigrants; The Scarecrow.*

Gale: *Neighbors.*

Leonard: **Glory of the Morning.*

Howells: *Farces.*

Moody: *The Great Divide.*

Peabody: *The Piper.*

Middleton: *Embers; Possession.*

Dix: *Across the Border.*